# New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1947

Volume VIII, Number 5 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of March 24, 1947

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THEATRE OPENINGS

"The Eagle Has Two Heads"

*Complete Reviews appear in this issue*

*Theatre Critics Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers*

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN — NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS — NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK MIRROR — NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK SUN — NEW YORK POST — NEW YORK TIMES

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# "The Eagle Has Two Heads"

The Sun

MARCH 20, 1947

## 'Eagle Has Two Heads' Gaudy Melodrama, It's Incredibly Tedious at Plymouth.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

The galvanic Tallulah Bankhead returned to town last night, dragging along a piece of theatrical rubbish called "The Eagle Has Two Heads," adapted by Ronald Duncan from the French of Jean Cocteau. It is put on at the Plymouth by John C. Wilson and it is not worth his time—or Bankhead's.

"The Eagle Has Two Heads," on tour for many weeks and understandably reluctant about coming to Broadway, is a hollow and gaudy melodrama, often unintentionally funny, and one that is crowded with interminable speeches, and very dull ones. Once the Queen gets wound up there's no stopping her. And that also goes for her wall-scaling, ivy-climbing lover.

Miss Bankhead has a first-act oration that is probably longer than that of Eugene O'Neill's Iceman, and it's ten times the length of the rabbit's-heartbeat speech out of William Vaughn Moody's "Great Divide." It seemed last night that the star of the Plymouth's new play was quite ready to cut short her declamation before she was half done.

From "Nice People" to "The Little Foxes," from "The Exciters" to "Foolish Notion," Tallulah Bankhead has remained an interesting and resourceful actress, one of vibrance and vitality. She has turned in some first-rate performances in inferior plays. In the worthy "Little Foxes" there was no better actress in the land. But she can't do much with, or for, "The Eagle Has Two Heads." In fact, she frequently becomes pretty monotonous.

The story? It's one that might have once held the fancy of James K. Hackett, but he would have made a comedy of it. In brief, it's just the tale of a poet who comes to the castle to kill the beautiful Queen, who has been in seclusion for ten years, ever since her King was murdered on their wedding day. The Queen and the poet fall desperately in love. He realizes that it is a love that cannot endure, so he takes poison. The Queen, not wanting life without him, torments him into shooting her. They're both sprawled out on Donald Oenslager's fancy staircase, as the curtain falls—quite dead. But the play died much earlier.

Helmut Dantine, good looking and stagey, plays the tragic poet. The unctuous and usually expert Clarence Derwent is the evil Baron. Eleanor Wilson is the prying Countess and Kendall Clark appears as the stuffy and loyal Duke. They're all lost, along with the star.

Aline Bernstein's costumes and Oenslager's scenery are very fine, but completely wasted.

**'THE EAGLE HAS TWO HEADS.'**

A romantic melodrama by Jean Cocteau, adapted from the French by Ronald Duncan; staged by John C. Wilson; settings by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Aline Bernstein; presented by John C. Wilson at the Plymouth Theater Wednesday evening, March 19, 1947. The cast:

Countess ..... Edith de Berg
Eleanor Wilson
Maxim, Duke of Willemstein, ..... Kendall Clark
The Queen ..... Tallulah Bankhead
Stanislas ..... Helmut Dantine
Tony ..... Cherokee Thornton
Baron Foehn ..... Clarence Derwent

Synopsis—Act I. The Queen's Bedroom, evening. Act II. The Library, the next afternoon. Act III. The same, the following morning.

PM EXCLUSIVE

MARCH 21, 1947

Kronenberger

## *Proof That Two Heads Aren't Better Than One*

*PM Reviews*

Nothing worse need be said of Jean Cocteau's play than that it is a resounding bore. But after that, nothing that *is* said probably matters much; analysis merely turns into autopsy. Even the electrical personality of Tallulah Bankhead fails to be very important particularly since Miss Bankhead provides something less than an electrical performance.

*The Eagle Has Two Heads* is billed as "romantic melodrama," and the story it tells comes readily enough under that heading. Miss Bankhead plays the vaguely 19th-century Queen of some even vaguer European monarchy; her young husband was assassinated during their honeymoon, and for ten years she has lived in retirement, gone about veiled, and been morbidly in love with death. Suddenly a handsome revolutionary poet, prepared to kill her, flings himself through her bedroom window; the poet strikingly resembles her dead husband, and she falls instantly in love with him, as he with her. His revolutionary purpose shattered, he robbes her to become the active ruler again in her conspiratorial kingdom; but having got the queen to face reality, the poet cannot face it himself, and the play ends on a grandiosely theatrical note of tragedy.

• • •

This royal-purple plot is furthermore unfolded in pretty purple rhetoric, with monumentally long speeches and dubious aphorisms; and in an atmosphere of rumbling conspiracy and rigid court etiquette. Most of it seems as high as a kite and as hollow as a drum. Conceivably it introduces symbolism here and there, or has something to say about poets who are great revolutionaries with words but paralyzed by the world of action; but just as conceivably it does not.

• • •

Indeed, any key to *The Eagle Has Two Heads* must be sought not in the play but in the playwright. The highly sophisticated Cocteau can hardly be supposed to have written anything so close to sheer balderdash without calculated intentions, without having set himself a particular problem. As it happens, outmoded literary forms seem to have a great fascination for certain avant-garde writers right now; they see in them the chance to achieve various striking effects. Here, it would seem, Cocteau was using the whole paraphernalia of romanticism, rhetoric and high-styled melodrama to contrive a kind of bi-focal theater piece, something that seen close up might have a conventional excitement about it, but that might also take on a rococo grandeur, a certain charm of distance. It was an exercise in pure artifice.

• • •

Perhaps in France, with its long and precise tradition of the grand manner, with its actors trained to play and its audiences to appreciate it, *The Eagle Has Two Heads* makes effective highfalutin. Perhaps in French, moreover, the play achieves brilliant effects of language. But on Broadway, Cocteau can only seem to have thoroughly miscalculated, and his play only seems like tedious hokum.

• • •

As for Miss Bankhead, she is a brilliant actress generally, but she too has rather miscalculated. She has the authority of a queen, and the force for the big melodramatic moments; but she lacks the stylized manner for the part as a whole. Its long speeches, for which the delivery is everything, stump her—which is not to her discredit, for in English they are lifeless speeches. Helmut Dantine is suitably romantic-looking as the poet, but not very effective. Donald Oenslager's sets and Aline Bernstein's costumes have the right period manner.

—Louis Kronenberger

New York World-Telegram

MARCH 20, 1947

# Tallulah's New Play Even Bores Her

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The first two acts of Tallulah Bankhead's new vehicle, "The Eagle Has Two Heads," are perplexing. It seems a superhuman feat for anyone to have learned such interminable, dull speeches about so uninteresting a subject.

Midway in the third act there starts an explanatory scene. Here is something for the star to sink her very capable teeth into. In the last 20 minutes there is suicide, murder, deception, violence and spectacle.

This gamut of a finale is vitiated by loving explanations that deny the only guts the play has. The eagle, however, is already a dead duck.

One can imagine Miss Bankhead mulling over this play. True, she might say, nothing happens for two hours. But offstage thunder in the first act can punctuate speeches without emphasis of their own. And there ought to be an atmosphere of brooding intrigue to build to the climax.

Certainly, it is a star part, with some of the longest speeches on record. And in that precious windup, the Queen sees her future blasted, horsewhips her lover, gets shot in the back, waves weakly at her soldiers, and falls dead down a flight of stairs, pulling 20 odd feet of portiere with her.

That would clearly be a setup difficult for any actress to resist.

Miss Bankhead's great quality on the stage is of courage and freedom, scorn for convention or boredom.

The Queen here has despised her rigid life before she married, then bored herself into a coma of seclusion for 10 years since the king died.

It is a life as foreign to the actress' personality as a polliwog's, and the dynamic Miss Bankhead shows her boredom.

To express suppression she limits her fascinating voice to a monotonous range of about three tones. The result is that she sounds as if she did not in the least care what she was talking about.

It is further unbelievable that she would keep as her sole company for a decade two utterly wearisome attendants, veiling her beauty from the Duke, and showing it only to the Countess and a mute servant. This is hardly the woman who likes bats, rats, thunder and violence.

The whole conception of the play is murky. Set timelessly in a mythical country, it is written in singsong language that falls just short of vague blank verse.

The lover, a revolutionary poet who comes to assassinate the Queen, looks remarkably like the dead King.

Helmut Dantine reads the poet's lines with surly dramatic power, but he is physically stiff. His unrelenting erectness gives the impression that he is much more the born-and-bred aristocrat than Miss Bankhead's Queen.

In some magnificent sets inclined to overpower the action, the play is directed with a stupified awe of royal atmosphere entirely failing of grandeur.

Clarence Derwent plays the Baron in an operetta style that enhances matters little, but at least shows he knows he is in Graustark.

It has frequently been said that the glamorous Tallulah is better than her current vehicle. To repeat the comment now is at best a back handed compliment.

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Journal American

MARCH 20, 1947

# 'Eagle Has 2 Heads' Offered at Plymouth

By ROBERT GARLAND

WHEN something's too silly to be said, you can sing it. And when it's too silly to be sung, there's always dancing. And if it's too silly to be danced, you can pass it on to Tallulah Bankhead and have her act it for all she's worth on the stage of a Broadway theatre. Which is just about what happened to "The Eagle Has Two Heads."

There's hardly ever been a sillier theatrical contraption than the silly theatrical contraption Miss Bankhead brought last night into the Plymouth. Programs, getting themselves out from under, call it a "romantic melodrama." If this is so, the romance is baloney and the melodrama is a thin slice of stale bread on which to let it lay.

**Watching one of the show-shop's foremost ladies doing her brilliant best to get away with her Ronald Duncan-out-of-Jean Cocteau nonsense, this particular member of the courteous opening audience became more and more irked as the evening slowly waned. Why should the great Tallulah waste his time on such poppycock as this?**

But wasting his time she was, under the production banner of John Wilson, with Helmut Dantine, Clarence Derwent, Kendall Clark, Eleanor Wilson and Cherokee Thornton playing dutifully into her hands. In a curtain speech, the Bankhead came out and said she thought it would never come off. She was, I fear, mistaken...

It'll come off, all right. And sooner than expected.

* * *

## Goofy Graustark

In "The Eagle Has Two Heads," Tallulah Bankhead has lost her actorial way in some unnamed goofy Graustark. In gowns by Pons, jewels by Karinska, hair by Lerch and make-up by Arden, the Bankhead is The Queen, a royal widow who keeps company with her dear departed king instead of a commoner like Harvey.

**When the curtain rises on Donald Oenslager's pretty palace at the Plymouth, The Queen is having her royal rabbit in for dinner. You can't see him, but Tallulah knows he's there. So she opens the door, pulls out his chair, pours out his wine and, in lieu of victuals gives him a bit of fortune-telling for an entree.**

Then, from the dark and dirty night without, comes one Stanislas to slay her. But, before he gets around to it, the palace guards have winged him in the knee. Not relishing blood on her best bedroom carpet, The Queen hides her Stanislas very much as Nadina Popoff hides her Bumerli up in "The Chocolate Soldier." But without music.

The rest is talk, talk, talk; lowfalutin talk in highfalutin language. In the opening act, Tallulah Bankhead has the floor. In the second, the floor belongs to Helmut Dantine. In the third, which is the final, the floor's possessed by the two of them. And the balcony and flight of stairs designed for the pictorial demise of The Queen and the pictorial despair of the Stanislas who plugged her.

Why, you wonder, did he have to miss her in the first place?

* * *

## Why Did She Pick It?

And why, you continue to wonder, did so great and glamorous a performer as Tallulah Bankhead insist upon the production of "The Eagle Has Two Heads" with herself, in person, in the leading role. And, after having brought it into being on the road, why did she fetch it onto Broadway? As she once said, there's less to it than meets the eye.

**Frankly, I don't think she's as good as she should be as The Queen who meets her lover and her comeuppance within 24 on-stage hours. Last night, she played with a chip on her shoulder and a determination not to be heard beyond the eleventh row. She was beautiful. She was glamorous. She was almost anything but every inch a queen.**

**Helmut Dantine, whose name sounds like a toothpaste and who comes out of old Vienna by way of Hollywood, does whatever he can do as the pistol-packing Stanislas. Eleanor Wilson and Kendall Clark are Sardou-like act-openers, but without their feather-dusters. Cherokee Thornton speaks no word as Tony. Clarence Derwent is Clarence Derwent.**

All of which adds up to a dish of cambric tea in which Tallulah Bankhead is wasted. Throughout the years, in private and in public, I've pointed out that Miss Bankhead could come out on a lighted stage and, thanks to her talent, temperament and personal attractiveness, read the New York Telephone Directory out loud and get away with it...

After "The Eagle Has Two Heads," I wish to God she would!

## New York Post

MARCH 20, 1947

### Tallulah Bankhead Back In Unhappy Vehicle

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Miss Bankhead, who is a legendary wit as well as a fascinating actress, is supposed to have said of some unfortunate drama that "there is less in this than meets the eye." I do not remember what play she was referring to, but it might well have been her own current vehicle, "The Eagle Has Two Heads," which opened at the Plymouth Theatre last night.

Since it is the work of Jean Cocteau, who is a writer of considerable standing in France, this "romantic melodrama," as the playbill calls it, might be expected to have something at least reasonably interesting to say, particularly as it is frequently couched in fancy language presumably pregnant with philosophical subtleties. If it ever possessed any such virtue, it has certainly been lost in translation, for at present "The Eagle Has Two Heads" hasn't even the value of being a good vehicle.

As everyone knows, a New York theatrical season is always lacking in savor if it passes without the appearance of Tallulah Bankhead in a play. She invariably brings a needed quality of excitement with her when she walks on a stage, and she is certainly one of the few actresses left with a welcome aura of what Hollywood breathlessly calls "glamour." Yet in the Cocteau play even this resourceful and electric star is so entangled in the monotony of her role that it is not until the third act that she manages to demonstrate her celebrated prowess at shooting the works.

Anyway, against handsomely regal Donald Oenslager settings and in impressive Aline Bernstein costumes, Miss Bankhead is the widowed queen of some mythical kingdom or other. A melancholy girl with an amorous fondness for death, she broods over her murdered husband, carries on a monologue presumably directed at his ghost and dreams of destruction, while agents of a sinister baron spy on her and only a deaf-and-dumb Negro serves her faithfully.

Would it fascinate you to know that a handsome young revolutionary poet comes to the Queen's Bedroom, bent on her assassination? I doubt if it would as the play tells it, any more than you will be excited to learn that he turns out to look like her late husband, they fall in love, and nothing good comes of it. It is more to the point to report that the whole affair sounds like a dull amalgamation of "Graustark" and "The Prisoner of Zenda," with a touch of bad imitation Victor Hugo thrown in, and that the dialogue contains such epigrams as "Assassination is the privilege of princes."

As the poet, Helmut Dantine, of the movies, is no doubt properly handsome and sullen, but, in a play wherein even Miss Bankhead finds herself frequently baffled, it is not surprising that he and the rest of the supporting cast are hopelessly lost. It is so good to see Miss Bankhead again that I hate to be ungrateful to the play that brings her back, but "The Eagle Has Two Heads" is a preposterous bore.

## The New York Times

MARCH 20, 1947

### THE PLAY

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Tallulah Bankhead is playing a tragic queen, "The Eagle Has Two Heads" gratifies the eye at the Plymouth Theatre, where Jean Cocteau's drama opened last evening. But on general principles there must be more to his play than meets the ear. For what meets the ear is a resounding and stupefying emptiness. Somewhere amid all the purple phrases and royal grandiloquence M. Cocteau may be giving the world a great moral lesson. Of the eagle's two heads at least one is fearfully portentous.

But M. Cocteau's didactic method of writing a play is so boring that a normal playgoer in good health can hardly keep his mind on his work after the first ten minutes. In case M. Cocteau has a message, he could save all of us a lot of agony by writing it tersely on a postcard and mailing it around.

Not that anyone should wonder about Miss Bankhead's interest in the part. Our Tallulah is an actress, and the rôle of the Queen fairly bulges with richness—tragedy, passion, nobility, imperiousness, bravado, cruelty and loneliness. To dress her properly Aline Bernstein has whipped up regal gowns with glorious bosoms and majestic trains; and to give her the proper setting, Donald Oenslager has nailed together a grand staircase where a dying Queen can shuffle off and topple magnificently.

To Miss Bankhead's credit let it be said that she plays the Queen brilliantly enough to take the trick fairly. With all that patrician blood in her veins she is a Queen; she is beautiful and commanding; her throaty voice is high-born and persuasive; she can assume the prerogatives of royalty without disenchantment, and she can make the audience believe everything except the dialogue. In fact, Our Tallulah is the chief element that distinguishes the two-headed eagle from "The Black Crook."

On the literal plane, which was the only one visible last evening from the front benches, M. Cocteau's drama elaborately records the triumph of a lonely queen over a social-minded poet who pops in at the window to assassinate her. Behind the dialogue there may be a few adumbrations of social revolution as perceived by an exhausted poet who has been brooding; and there may be some fancy symbolism all through the play. But since Miss Bankhead does almost all the talking in the first act, and Helmut Dantine talks almost as continuously in the second act, a man would have to be chockful of drugs to listen.

Despite the orateness of M. Cocteau's style and the grandeur of his attitude, none of the actors is unbearably pompous. As the ravished bard with a Byronic collar, Mr. Dantine is sincere and straight-forward. Eleanor Wilson is not drowned in the obsequiousness of her part, and Kendall Clark manages to rescue some human dignity from the emotional orgy of Maxim, Duke of Willenstein. Clarence Derwent, the peerless leader of Equity, contrives something plausible and entertaining out of the monstrous treacheries of Baron Foehn. Cherokee Thornton is the luckiest actor in the cast; he plays the part of a deaf mute. On the whole, this is the most brilliant part M. Cocteau has written in his sad story of a melancholy monarch.

## Daily Mirror

MARCH 20, 1947

### 'Eagle Has 2 Heads' Dreary Hokum

By ROBERT COLEMAN

No recent whodunit has posed a greater mystery than why Tallulah Bankhead chose to waste her gifts on such dreary hokum as Jean Cocteau's "The Eagle Has Two Heads," which John C. Wilson, usually a producer of notable taste, brought to the Plymouth Theatre last evening.

When Cocteau penned this "romantic melodrama" he must have been under the combined spells of Scribe, Sardou and K. S. Goodman. Seldom has so much emptyness been caught in so much plot. It takes a playgoer with the hair-trigger facility of Harvard's mechanical mathematician to keep tabs on its kaleidoscopic twistings.

Remember Goodman's one-acter, "The Game of Chess," wherein a shrewd noble tricks a revolutionary assassin by drinking poison with him? Of course, the nobleman had become immune to poison by taking small daily doses of it.

Well, Cocteau gives us a Queen, ten years a widow, veiled from the world, living alone with memories of her King, victim of an assassin's dagger on their wedding day.

During a storm, another assassin comes bounding through her bedroom window, chased by police, wounded in the knee. The foolhardy queen conceals the fellow from his pursuers until she can find out what makes him tick.

He proves to be a revolutionary poet who has been penning inflammatory verses about her. And he is as good looking as film star Helmut Dantine, who plays him. So the shy, retiring queen falls madly in love with him. And the poet persuades her to return to her capital and become an effective and wise ruler.

The gullible idealist doesn't suspect till too late that the psychopathic Queen doesn't give a darn about her people or her country. All she's interested in is getting herself killed. And this she manages, at his expense, in one of the most magnificently corny endings of modern times.

Expiring on a roccoco palace stairs, she must have visualized in her tawdry, theatrical mind, that she and her sharp-shooting lover were headed right for the abode of Abelard and Heloise, Paola and Francesca, Tristan and Isolde.

Miss Bankhead is an electric, vibrant actress. She could read the alphabet and make it exciting. That what she read of "The Eagle Has Two Heads"—and it is plenty—only made some of the first nighters chuckle from embarrassment proves what a misuse Cocteau and his English adapter, Ronald Duncan, have made of the alphabet.

Other unfortunates lured into Cocteau's flambouyant web are Clarence Derwent, Kendall Clark and Eleanor Wilson.

"The Eagle Has Two Heads," in sum, rattles around in Donald Oenslager's sumptuous sets like the pea in a carnival shell game. And it is just as phony.